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Teachers' action strategies in goal-oriented interactions with young children at risk

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Teachers possess several strategies to fine-tune their purposive interactions to children's needs. Our study investigates which strategies teachers use in their goal oriented interactions with pupils, whether differentiation is perceptible in the way they interact with children whom they define as 'children at risk' as compared to the other children in the classroom. The study is qualitative descriptive, on the base of a multiple-case study design; six teachers were followed at several stages in the educational process. Classroom observations and interviews with the teachers are analysed by means of pattern analysis. In this article, we describe two patterns found, hunting the label and positioning. The results of our study might be useful for estimating the effects of different purposive interactions on a pupil's learning processes.

Les enseignants possèdent différentes stratégies pour accorder leurs interactions finalisées aux besoins des enfants. Notre recherche porte sur les stratégies utilisées par les enseignants dans leurs interactions finalisées avec les élèves, et sur leur éventuelle différenciation selon qu'il s'agit d'enfants définis comme 'à risques' ou pas. Il s'agit d'une recherche qualitative, fondée sur des études de cas: six enseignants ont été suivis au cours de plusieurs étapes du processus éducatif. L'analyse des observations de classe et des entretiens avec les enseignants a permis de dégager plusieurs patterns. Dans cet article, nous décrirons deux d'entre eux qui s'opposent à l'étiquetage et au classement. Les résultats de notre recherche peuvent être utiles pour évaluer les effets des différentes interactions finalisées sur les processus d'apprentissage des élèves.

Erzieher besitzen verschiedene Strategien des Fine-Tunings ihrer gezielten Interaktionen zu den Bedürfnissen der Kinder. Diese Studie untersucht, welche Strategien Lehrer in ihren zielgerichteten Interaktionen mit Schülern anwenden, ob Unterschiede wahrnehmbar sind in der Art wie die Lehrer mit Kindern interagieren, die sie als 'Risiko-Kinder' einstufen im Vergleich zu den anderen Kindern der Klasse. Die Untersuchung ist qualitativ-beschreibend auf der Basis eines multiplen Fallstudien Designs. Sechs Lehrer wurden auf verschiedenen Stufen des pädagogischen Prozesses

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begleitet. Beobachtungen im Klassenraum und Interviews mit den Lehrern wurden anhand von Musteranalysen analysiert. In diesem Beitrag beschreiben wir zwei Muster, die Bezeichnung suchen und Positionierung. Die Ergebnisse unserer Studie könnten nützlich sein für die Einschätzung der Wirkung unterschiedlich gezielter Interaktionen auf Lernprozesse von Schülern.

Los profesores poseen muchas estrategias para afinar su interacción de apoyo a las necesidades de los niños. Nuestro estudio investiga que estrategias usan los maestros en sus interacciones con los alumnos orientadas a lograr metas, que diferencias pueden percibirse en la forma de interactuar con niños que ellos definen como “niños en riesgo”, comparados con otros niños en la sala de clases. El estudio es cualitativo descriptivo, basado en un diseño de caso múltiple; seis maestros fueron observados en las diferentes fases del proceso educacional. Observaciones en la sala de clases y entrevistas con los profesores fueron analizadas por medio de un análisis de patrones de acción. En este artículo describimos dos patrones hallados: caza de etiquetas y posicionamiento. Los resultados de nuestro estudio pueden ser útiles para estimar los efectos sobre los procesos de aprendizaje del alumno de diferentes interacciones intencionales.

Keywords: case study; children at risk; purposive interactions; teaching strategies; teachers' images

Strategies in teaching

Over the past decades a significant change has taken place in the approach to teaching. For a long time, teaching used to be conceived as a technological process aiming at the transmission of cultural knowledge and abilities to a classroom of pupils. However, many studies about teaching show that teaching cannot be considered as a prearranged activity, but rather should be perceived as a type of situated *problem-solving* (Bruer, 1996; Tharp *et al.*, 2000).

Except for the youngest pupils in primary school, this technological approach was applied (in many industrialised countries) from the age of 6 or 7 years. From this point of view, the curriculum was conceived as a teacher's tool that tailored the learning processes to the developmental levels of the pupils and that should guarantee consistency in the sequence of learning. As a tool designed by professional academic educationalists, the curriculum was generally seen as a scientifically grounded *remote control* for the teaching behaviour of the teachers.

However, research since the 1970s has demonstrated that curricula were rarely executed as meant by the designer (see for example Goodlad *et al.*, 1974). Teachers use curricula selectively and tend to adjust the curricula (and the materials, methods and strategies implied) to their own educational philosophy, belief systems and abilities. Moreover, in the wake of recent cultural developments, teachers increasingly tend to regain their independence and responsibility for what happens in their classrooms. In an overview of curriculum theories since the early 1900s Pinar and others (1995) summarise this trend as follows:

Where the curriculum can be constructed now is the 'lived space' of the classroom, in the lived experience of pupils and teachers. (Pinar *et al.*, 1995, p. 860)

More than a century ago, Dewey (1902) already mentioned that teachers should be seen as sensibly acting personalities who use several cultural tools (including books

and methods) in their own way to assist pupils in their learning process. According to Dewey, making adjustments to curricula is a meaningful processing of documents by a teacher in a specific setting with a specific group of pupils.

In another study, Peters (2003) observed that teachers in special education classrooms committed to the concept of 'Developmental Education'¹ were able to fine-tune their interactions with children to the needs and abilities of these children. Particularly, the findings suggested that teachers can maintain the meaningfulness of the activities for these children when they take account of those aspects of the activity that the children cannot (yet) carry out independently. By doing so, the teachers constructed zones of proximal development for these children and step-by-step lay out a learning route ('curriculum') that is tailored to the needs and abilities of the children.

It is evident that teachers have a significant influence on what happens in the curriculum and in the classroom. The nature of the influence depends on the constraints of the situation, on the teachers' personal beliefs, expectations and attitude, and on how teachers interpret the behaviour of their pupils. As a result there is an increasing variation in the ways teachers interact with the children in their classrooms.

The impact of teachers' beliefs and expectations concerning pupils on the way they teach, was already demonstrated in the seminal book of Rosenthal and Jacobson in 1968. However, teachers also have particular objectives in their minds when interacting with pupils. Their interactions are almost always goal-oriented, trying to achieve some educational goal. Still, these *purposive interactions* can be accomplished in a number of different ways. A teacher who, for instance, believes that reading is basically a technical operation will probably adopt an approach based on drill and practise of elementary operations, whereas a teacher who conceives of reading as an act of text comprehension will most certainly engage pupils in collaborative and exploratory activities of meaning construction and text interpretation. It is, however, far from clear now how different types of interaction influence pupils' development and learning.

Although teachers probably have images of all their pupils and act accordingly, in this article we will report some of the outcomes of a study that investigates the interaction styles of teachers with at-risk children. These children are often in a vulnerable position in the classroom, and for helping these children appropriately it is important to know all factors that may contribute to their position. Hence, we wanted to know if the teacher's assessment of a particular pupil as 'at-risk' influences her interactions with him; furthermore we wanted to evaluate these interactions pedagogically. In due course, such information might be useful for estimating the effects of different purposive interactions on pupils' learning processes.

Risk factors for children's development

A number of studies have already addressed the question about the risk factors for children's development (see the EPPE studies of Kathy Sylva and her colleagues; for instance Sylva *et al.*, 2004). The findings suggest that there are different conditions in the child's life that may predict problems in learning and development in primary school. The attendance of preschool classes, the financial-economic situation of the

family, the educational level of the mother turn out to be among the predictors for problems in learning and development during primary school. For the teacher in the classroom, however, these conditions cannot be easily influenced or changed. Teachers must find ways for compensating for these conditions if they want to promote the development of at-risk children.

According to Vygotsky (1993), developmental problems may result from such causes as neurophysical characteristics or environmental conditions. Such primary causes may be hard to change. However, in his view, there is another type of causes that may be even stronger determinants of developmental outcomes. These so-called 'secondary causes' are rooted in the educator's conceptions of the child's developmental potentials. If the child is believed to have low intellectual or social capabilities, the educator acts accordingly and as a result decreases the number and quality of the child's opportunities for development. Many authors confirm this correlation between the educator's view of the child and the nature of her purposeful interactions. Coles (1987), Evans (1993) and McDermott (1996) go so far as to suggest that the educators make a learning problem. From his ecological theory of development, Bronfenbrenner (1978) points out that an educator's pedagogical view is a significant determinant of the child's course of development. Likewise, Gauthier (2001) considers the educator's psycho-pedagogical view as an important aspect of a developmental niche, which co-determines the child's development. Weinstein (2002) did an extensive exploration of the empirical literature regarding the effect of educators' expectations on children's development and conducted a detailed case study of the effect of low expectations on children's development. She concluded that higher expectations of a child's developmental potentials often go together with more stimulating interactions and better developmental outcomes.

On the basis of theoretical analyses and previous research we expected that there is a relationship between the teachers' presumptions regarding the developmental potentials of the child and their adjustment of the curriculum (in terms of specific purposive interactions). We expect that this will be manifested in both the cognitive challenges for the child, and in the social relationships between teacher and child.

Setup of the study

From these findings we may speculate that the teacher's view of a child as an at-risk pupil might cause an attitude in the teacher to adjust her purposive interactions to the supposed developmental potentials of the child. This may result, for example, in less than optimal conditions for the child's development: lower expectations, reduced meaningfulness of the tasks (assuming that this makes the task less complex and easier to do for the child), impoverished language input for the child (short sentences, imperative language, etc.), increased control of the process (leaving less room for the child to organise its own activity). In a series of classroom observations and interviews with teachers we want to explore these assumptions. Our research questions are:

1. Does the teacher adopt a different approach to children she considers to be at-risk (as compared to other pupils in her classroom)?
2. What is the nature of the purposive interactions of the teacher with pupils she considers to be at-risk?

In order to answer our questions, we planned to do a series of case studies in six classrooms, observing the teachers' interactions with the pupils. The data collection in the study is based on a multiple-case study design (see Yin, 1994). The schools were selected because of the teachers' participation in a course for action-oriented observation of pupils that should enable teachers to build detailed conceptions of pupils' mathematics and literacy abilities and interests. Four teachers chose to focus on the domain of literacy, the other two chose the domain of mathematics. Each classroom had a number of pupils that the teacher considered problematic in their school attainments. All schools use curricular methods for their literacy and mathematics education as a guideline for the lessons.

At the moment of writing this article, the study is halfway through. In the first year we did the case studies in grade 3 classrooms of six different primary schools in the Netherlands (the mean age of the pupils was 6.5 years). During the year we observed the teachers' activity twice: the first time in November or December, the second time by the end of the school year (June). In this way we can also investigate if the followed course has changed the teachers' attitude (and purposive interactions) towards the children alleged at-risk. Next school year we will follow the same children into grade 4. In this manner we will be able to study how the teachers of grade 3 communicate their pictures of the children to the grade 4 teacher. In grade 4 the teachers will be studied during the first semester in the same way as happened to the teachers in grade 3.

The three periods of observation have a similar set up.

- *Semi-structured in-depth interview.* Each of the participating teachers is interviewed in order to assess their philosophy of education and view on teaching. In addition, we try to find out in which way the teacher prepares a lesson, how she takes into account the individual characteristics of the children, how and which decisions she makes for the next educational step for (individual) pupils. The teacher is asked about her expectations of individual pupils in regard to achievement, participation, difficulties, etc.
- *Observation and video-registration.* Two successive mathematics or literacy lessons are observed and filmed to examine whether the actual teaching corresponds with the teacher's initial plans. Which strategies does the teacher use for realisation of her purposive interactions? Which specific adjustments are made, how, when and why? The teachers are asked to keep a logbook of the lessons, to make notes of their role in activities, and of the pupils' participation.
- *Stimulated recall.* Parts of the video-registration are watched together with the teacher to ascertain the precise motivation of decisions made during the lessons, and to check our interpretations.

Moreover, each teacher fills out the Dutch translation of the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) (Pianta, 2001; Cornelissen & Verschueren, 2002). The STRS

measures a teacher's perception of her relationship with a particular pupil. It focuses on relationship patterns in terms of conflict, closeness, and dependency, as well as the overall quality of the relationship. With this information we can also examine if a teacher's purposive interactions with (at-risk) pupils is related to ideological background or social relationships.

This article is based on the data we gathered during the first observations of three of the teachers in grade three classrooms. Table 1 contains information about the teachers (all female) and the children in their classrooms.

In each classroom we selected three children whom the teacher defines as at-risk (on the basis of the outcomes of the STRS, the interviews with the teacher, and the frequency of contact during the observation). We also randomly selected three children in each classroom whom the teacher does not define as at-risk (on the basis of the same criteria). We transcribed all interactions of the teacher with these six pupils. The transcripts and interviews were analysed by means of 'pattern analysis' (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this hermeneutic process of reading and interpreting the data, we were looking for repeating acting strategies of the teachers. If we found a remarkable strategy used by a teacher in her goal-oriented interaction with an 'at-risk' child, we described the characteristics of this strategy, and investigated whether this strategy was used frequently. Subsequently we applied the strategy to all the data we gathered. In this way we were able to investigate whether more than one teacher used the pattern found. By using pattern analysis we tried to find out whether and how the teachers' assessment of a particular pupil as 'at-risk' influences her interaction with him.

Patterns of interactions

By analysing the observations and interviews we found several strategies that the teachers use in their purposive interactions with children at-risk. In this article we will describe two patterns, *hunting the label* and *positioning*.

Pattern: hunting the label

Individual contact between a teacher and a pupil is an important opportunity for giving specific support to the individual needs of the child. By participating as a

Table 1. Description of the sample

	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3
Years of experience in education	10	25	30
Years of experience in grade 3	2	5	6
Number of children in the class	16	26	19
Number of boys in the class	11	14	9
Number of girls in the class	5	12	10
Number of minority children	14	2	1
Location of the school	urban	rural	urban

partner in the child's activity, the teacher can create a zone of proximal development through promoting new actions that are significant for the shared activity. However, what we see in the observations of the three teachers in our study is that they do not look for the educational needs of the at-risk children while participating in the pupil's activity. The teacher has a certain goal in mind, which she wants to achieve with the child. By this, the initiative lies completely in the hands of the teacher. She does not pay attention to the interests and needs of the pupil. Consequently, the activity's meaningfulness for the child is reduced. The observations show that the teachers fall into a question-answer pattern. Instead of an equivalent interaction, we see here the three-part structure (IRE), frequently described in the research literature on classroom interaction. In this IRE pattern, the *initiation* lies in the hands of the teacher, mostly in the form of a question. The pupil gives a *response*, he tries to answer the question. Thereupon, the teacher gives an *evaluation*, she tells the pupil if his response was correct or not. By doing so, the teacher gives the pupil no opportunity to negotiate about the (personal) meaning of his response after the teacher's feedback. She leaves him no room for his own initiative. This type of interaction forces the child to search for the right answer the teacher has in mind. It looks like a process of '*hunting the label*' (see also Barnes, 1975). Below we will describe a few examples to illustrate this strategy.

In example 1, a teacher is working with Nick on a writing task. In her preceding interview with the researcher, she mentions that Nick's performances are low, he needs much individual assistance. The Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) shows that the teacher experiences their relationship as difficult.

The text below is a translation from the original Dutch transcript.

Example 1: how do you spell 'drop'?

(T = Teacher; N = Nick)

T: And what is this? [points in Nick's book]

N: [looks at his book, then at the teacher]

T: What is this?

N: [looks at his book again]

T: [starts talking to another pupil, then turns back to N] What is this anyway?

N: [whispers] 'drop'¹

T: Yes, that's 'drop'. The word 'drop', can you spell the letters?

N: 'd' 'r' 'op'

T: Very good, now look for the first letter, here in this line [points in his book]

N: [points at a letter]

T: [whispers something in his ear]

N: [colours some letters]

T: Okay, now we're going to take a look at the last letter, because the 'o' is already there, right?

N: [looks in his book]

- T: Which one do you need there?
 N: [looks at the class, then in his book]
 T: 'Drop', which letter do you hear in the end?
 N: (...) [incomprehensible]
 T: Say the word.
 N: 'd' 'r' 'o' 'p'
 T: Yes! So, do you see the letter?
 N: [plays with his pencil, does not look in his book]
 T: You have to look in this line [points in his book]
 N: [colors the 'p']

The teacher solely focuses on writing the word 'drop'. Her purposive interaction is reduced to communication about letter knowledge. In this way, the activity loses its meaning for Nick, it does not connect with his own world of experience. We clearly see the IRE structure in this example. The teacher has the initiative, she asks the questions and has a specific answer in mind. Nick's contribution consists of *hunting the label*, a task he obviously does not like. In her interview, the teacher explains her way of working with this pupil: 'When I talk to Nick, I have to adjust my use of language. I have to take more time for instruction; using more simple words or giving a description of things. Otherwise he doesn't understand it.' Here we see that the teacher's view of a pupil as an at-risk child causes adjustments in her purposive interaction to the supposed developmental potentials of the child. This results in a reduced meaningfulness of the task and in an impoverished language input for the child.

Example 2 shows the interaction between the same teacher and Janneke and Joris, pupils of whom the teacher has good expectations. The children stamped words, which belong to the theme 'post'. The teacher takes a look at the children's work.

Example 2: What did you make?

(T = Teacher; Jo = Joris; Ja = Janneke)

- T: [looks at Joris] Okay, what did you make?
 Jo: Uhm ... balance scale³ ...
 T: Balance scale? That's a difficult word!
 Jo: (...) and (...) [incomprehensible]
 T: Wonderful! But you should be careful with the ink, when you get ink on your finger, your paper will get blue.
 [turns to Janneke] And what did Janneke make?
 Ja: [looks at her paper, hesitates] (...) [incomprehensible]
 T: Take a look at the word you stamped, what is the first letter?
 Ja: [looks at the teacher]
 Some children in the class start screaming.
 T: [turns to the children] Nick, in a moment I'll come to you, okay?
 [turns back to Janneke]
 Ja: [whispers] telephone

- T: Telephone, yes! [smiles to her] And what else?
 Ja: [looks at her paper]
 T: A very difficult word, shall I read it to you?
 Ja: [nods]
 T: [points at the word] mail collection.⁴ That means that the postman picks up the letters from the mailbox. Mail collection. Difficult word, isn't it?
 Ja: [nods]

We see that the teacher's approach to Janneke and Joris differs from the approach to Nick in the first example. The strict IRE structure is replaced for the IRF sequence (Wells, 1999). The initiation still lies in the hands of the teacher, and the pupils give a response. The feedback, however, is not merely an evaluation of the teacher, rather a *follow-up*. The purposive interaction is not reduced to elementary reading skills, but takes place in the context of the children's own activity. The teacher's questions are meaningful to them. Although we see that the teacher's approach to these pupils differs from her approach to Nick, she still could improve her intervention. For example, she takes the initiative, thereby reducing the children's contribution. Moreover, she hardly stimulates the children's thinking and does not create opportunities for negotiation of meaning with them. During the stimulated recall, the teacher comments: 'The pupils were doing well in this stamping activity; I was satisfied about their work. (...) But it was a bit frustrating that I didn't have more time for them at that moment; I was needed elsewhere. You could get more out of this activity with these children.'

Another teacher we studied sees her pupil Rachel as an at-risk child. In her interview, she explicitly mentions that Rachel needs extra instruction and short tasks. In her view, the pupil misses 'insight in mathematics and concepts in general'. The following example is an episode from the instruction for all the pupils in the class. The teacher gives a turn to Rachel.

Example 3: more or less?

(T = Teacher; R = Rachel; Ch = other children in the class; P = Pamela)

- T: Rachel, the first picture, how many apples are there?
 R: Eight.
 T: Eight, very good. And in the second picture?
 R: Six.
 T: Six. And is six more or less than eight?
 R: [silence]
 T: Is it more or less Rachel?
 R: Less.
 T: Less. And do you know how much less?
 R: [silence]
 ...

- T: [makes two rows of six pencils on a table and holds two pencils in her hand. She points at a row] How many is this?
 R: One.
 T: No, the whole row.
 R: Six.
 T: Six. And here? [points at the other row]
 R: Eight.
 T: No, is this eight? Now?
 R: Six
 T: Six as well, so now they are equal, right? But we had eight [adds two pencils to one of the rows], so how many more than six is this?
 R: [long silence]
 Ch: [sighing, moaning]
 T: Pamela, help her.
 P: Two.
 T: Two more! Look here, two more! You see Rachel?

Here, the IRE structure (Initiative–Response–Evaluation) is obvious as well; the teacher formulates the questions and provides an evaluation to the child's responses. She keeps trying until she hears the answer she has in mind. The entire interaction does not deal with the understanding of the matter (the concepts more and less), but with giving the right answer: *hunting the label*. The teacher does not provide a meaningful activity (despite, or maybe even due to the use of the pencils as visual support), to let Rachel understand why the answer should be 2. She does not animate the child to think, but just to give the right answer. During the stimulated recall the teacher says: 'I had expected that Rachel couldn't give the right answer, she just misses the insight in concepts. If you don't have the insight, then you just don't see it. And then you can give visual support, but it won't help. (...) So I have to repeat it for her daily. (...) But I'm satisfied with my instruction here. I think I've done all I could, to make her understand. This is what I normally do with her.' Her comment shows that this indeed is a pattern in her purposive interaction with this child. She is convinced about her way of acting, she is doing all she can. Therefore, the fact that Rachel is not able to give the right answer has, in this teacher's view nothing to do with the education the pupil gets, but the 'fault' lies in the child herself; 'she just misses the insight'. Gerald Coles (1987) calls this type of behaviour *victim-blaming*. In this way the teacher diverts the attention from her own teaching.

If we take a look at the interaction of this teacher with pupils of whom she has good expectations, it is striking that all the interaction consists of the IRE structure. Even with these pupils she uses the strategy *hunting the label*. The only difference we see is that the interactions with children at-risk last longer, because they experience more difficulties in finding the 'right' answer.

Examples 1 and 3 show a pattern we named *hunting the label*. The teacher has a specific answer in her mind, and keeps on asking till she hears that specific answer

from the pupil. In the teacher's view, there is only one answer to her question, the *correct* answer. She accepts no alternatives. However, she disregards that this is the only 'real' answer in her own reality. Children have their own realities as well. By using this strategy, she gives the children no opportunities for negotiation of meaning. Every form of creative thinking is counteracted. Instead, children are forced to hunt the label. In this way, the interaction follows the IRE structure, in which the initiation and evaluation lies in the hands of the teacher. These are not the only examples we found in our observations. All teachers show this approach to children whom they define as at-risk. The purposive interactions with these children are less meaningful because of this IRE strategy and the *hunting the label* characteristics. The teachers do not adjust their support to the children's educational needs; they do not create a zone of proximal development. They start from the children's shortcomings, instead of drawing on their actual abilities. The pupils obtain no space for organising their own activity. The teachers demand all the control. In this way, the children are not intrinsically involved in their own learning process.

Pattern: positioning

The teacher's expectations of children can be determining for the education the children receive. If a teacher labels a pupil as 'at-risk', she will act accordingly. The expectations will not be high, as this teacher will work narrowly from the actual level of achievement of the child. The pupil will notice that the teacher does not have high expectations, he gets little challenge and stimulation and consequently he will not be motivated to do his best. This works as a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the problems will only increase. This attitude is disastrous, as children need challenges.

One way to discover the teacher's expectations is to look at her approach of *positioning* the children in the classroom. On the basis of our observations we distinguish two types of this strategy: physical positioning, a clear and intentional variant and social positioning, a more subtle and unconsciousness variant.

Under *physical positioning* we understand the seating places that the teacher committed to the children. The three teachers in our study mention that some children need a special seating place. One teacher placed a pupil right in front of her desk. She clarifies: 'Richard is sitting there on his own because he's very disruptive. He's making noises, keeps other children busy. He hears every sound and looks up. That's why I put him there.' Another teacher placed a pupil at the back of the classroom. She says: 'David is very busy in his doings, all the time moving his chair and table. That's the reason we gave him that place on his own, because it was really chaotic for the children sitting next to him. And for himself as well; he has more peace now.'

Giving a child a place on his own in front or at the back of the classroom could be considered necessary in certain situations. However, the teacher should always keep in mind that if she gives the pupil a special and often impoverished position and that he is aware of this. The pupil feels that the teacher estimates him in a different way than the other pupils; otherwise he would have been placed in a small group like the others. All the children in the classroom are aware of this fact too. It also gives the

pupil a different social position in the group. Sitting in front of the class means sitting under the eyes of the teacher, as well as sitting in the view of all the other children. The pupil may feel controlled from every side. Getting a place at the back of the classroom literally signifies sitting outside of the group. This may result in less involvement in the class activities.

The third teacher reconstructed her class after getting the results of a reading test. She explains: ‘The test showed us that many children needed extra instruction. These children weren’t able to work independently as well; they showed less initiative. But we couldn’t place all the children close to the teacher. That’s how we came to this “horseshoe” formation. I’m very pleased with it.’

Figure 1 shows an impression of this ‘horseshoe’ formation. The ‘T’ stands for the position of the teacher while giving class instruction. The teacher has explained to the children why the table formation had changed, ‘some children need some more instruction than others’. So all the children in the class know why this subdivision is ‘necessary’. Weinstein (2002) has interviewed many pupils in the first grades of primary schools. It appeared that children perfectly know why they are grouped in a certain way and that their position gives a clue about their ‘relative smartness’ (p. 104).

Social positioning finds its expression in the teacher’s use of language, acting and behaviour. This is a more subtle and unconscious variant of positioning. We shall illustrate this pattern in a few examples.

Example 4: But François hasn’t

(T = Teacher; Ch = Children; M = Marilyn; F = François)

The teacher assists a group of four pupils in a reading task.

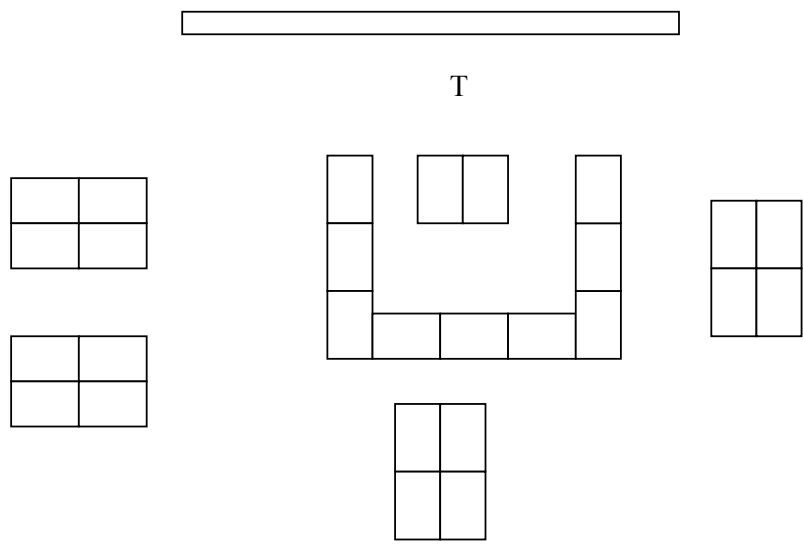


Figure 1. ‘Horseshoe’ formation

- T: Well, you've already taken a look in the text ...
 Ch: (...) [incomprehensible]
 T: Good, then we shall do that together as well.
 M: (...) [incomprehensible]
 T: [smiles at Marilyn, takes her book, looks at the other pupils] We're going to the second page, to this one [shows the right page]
 M: But we have done that already!
 T: Yes? But François hasn't.
 Ch: (...) [incomprehensible, protesting]
 T: Yes? And Eric may start reading in a moment, here on the second page.

The teacher wants to start reading at the second page, but the children protest; they have already read that part. By giving the answer 'but François hasn't', the teacher gives François a special position in this group. Everyone has to do that page again, because he has not done it yet ('he is behind, he is slow'). She positions him as the central figure in this group and is probably not aware of the negative notice François gets in this way. In spite of this attention, she gives the first turn to Eric, and not to François. By doing so, her comment becomes even more negative.

In the observation of another teacher we found a similar example. The teacher just gave a class instruction about the math tasks the children have to make on their own.

Example 5: Richard too?

(T = Teacher; Ch = Children; R = Richard)

- T: Has everyone understood this?
 Ch: Yes.
 T: Richard too?
 R: (...) [incomprehensible]
 T: Richard not completely, so we're going to do one more example for Richard. We're going to the next one. What are the children playing there, Richard?

After asking the class (as a group) if they had understood the instruction, she specifically asks Richard if he understands it too. First of all she lets him and the rest of the children know that she takes for granted that he needs more instruction. Otherwise she would not have asked him. But besides this expression of low expectations, she gives him a special position in the class. We can consider this as a form of negative attention: Richard is that boy who does not understand it. He is the reason why the whole group gets another instruction, why it goes so slowly, why we cannot move on! This very subtle and unconscious manner of positioning not only influences the relationship between the teacher and Richard, but between Richard and the other pupils as well. It gives them a clue about their own social position in the group. Some children might feel 'better' than Richard, because they knew all the answers. Other children, who did not understand the instruction either, will keep their mouth shut. Otherwise they will be placed in a special position as well. Social positioning undermines the community of learners.

The examples of physical and social positioning show which effects the teacher's expectations of children whom she defines as at-risk might bring about. By positioning a pupil, deliberately or unconsciously, the teacher makes a special case of this particular child. She estimates him differently than the other children in the classroom and all pupils are aware of this structure. Physical and social positioning mean that one pupil is distanced from the other children. With physical positioning the child literally gets a place outside of the group. If a teacher uses social positioning, her comment places the child outside of the group as well. At that moment, the pupil does not belong to the other children in the classroom, the community. He stands on his own. The pupil is seen as a failing individual, what could lead to a stronger sense of togetherness among the other children; 'we know the answer', 'we have already done that'. The pupil will blame himself, which could lead to an inferior feeling.

Conclusions and discussion

In this study we were interested in the question of whether a teacher adopts a different approach to children she considers to be at-risk (as compared to other pupils in her classroom). More specifically we wanted to investigate the nature of the purposive interactions of the teacher with pupils she defines as at-risk. Our analyses of the observations and interviews with three teachers show that they do use a different approach to children 'at-risk'. We distinguished two patterns in their purposive interactions with these children.

The teachers use the strategy *hunting the label* to get the 'right' answer from the pupil. They do not fine-tune their interactions to the needs and abilities of this specific pupil, which leads to a less meaningful activity for the child. The teachers demand all the control, they leave no room for the child's own initiative. In this way, the pupil is animated in a passive role and does not get a chance to become involved in his own developmental process.

Positioning is the second pattern we described. Under *physical positioning* we understand the way of grouping the children by the teacher. *Social positioning* is a more subtle and unconscious variant, finding its expression in the teacher's use of language, acting and behaviour. Both types of positioning place a pupil outside of the group of children.

The strategies we described show a different approach to children who teachers consider to be at-risk. The examples illustrate that children end up in less meaningful activities in which they get no room for their own initiative or negotiation of meaning. The teachers do not challenge the children and even place them outside the community of learners. We may speculate that these children will lose their motivation to participate in the classroom activities and consequently get behind the other children in the classroom. In this way the educators actually make a learning problem, and render the child 'problematic' or 'at-risk'.

In this study we followed the teachers' judgments about children that were at risk, because we were primarily interested in the influence of teachers' personal images of children on their way of interacting with these children. It cannot be ruled out absolutely that some of these children would not be qualified as 'at-risk' if we had selected the

target children on the basis of objective criteria. However, if we want to understand the influence of the teachers' judgments on the learning processes of children, we have to start from the images the teachers themselves have. Further research is needed to examine the basis of the teachers' judgements and the validity of these judgements.

Studies like these also call for serious ethical considerations. We recruited the teachers in this study from schools that were already involved in an in-service teacher training programme on action-oriented assessment. Through this programme teachers were already involved in activities of systematic reflection on their own teaching. All teachers in the study participated on a voluntary basis and were briefed in advance about the purposes and methods of the study. The researcher tried to observe in the classrooms as unobtrusively as possible, and did not intervene in the teaching process. The video footings were discussed afterwards with the teacher in order to get valid and honest interpretations of the events in the classrooms. In the report we anonymised the school, teachers and pupils. The outcomes of the study will be reported to the teacher trainers so that possibly negative outcomes can be followed-up by further professional support for the improvement of teaching on those critical points.

We have to be careful with the outcomes of this study and with generalising the results. Our research so far is based on the observations and interviews of three teachers. Further investigation has to prove if the patterns found occur in the classroom practices of other teachers as well.

By presenting these findings, it is not our intention to denigrate teachers. They are doing a great job in educating children. We assume that teachers may not always be (fully) aware of the consequences of their actions. Our aim is to discover these patterns of interaction and describe the strategies and their effects for the children at-risk. Such information might be useful for estimating the effects of different purposive interactions on pupils' learning processes and development.

Notes

1. 'Developmental Education' is a Vygotsky-based approach to education in the Netherlands.
2. *Drop* is a typical Dutch kind of candy (a sort of licorice).
3. The Dutch word is 'weegschaal'.
4. The Dutch word is 'postlichting'.

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